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AUTHOR Girard, Kathryn L.
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ABSTRACT

Conflict resolution refers generally to strategies that enable students to handle conflicts peacefully and cooperatively outside the traditional disciplinary procedures. This digest discusses several approaches, both inservice and preservice, to preparing teachers to play a role in conflict resolution within schools and identifies problematic issues related to this preparation such as principal's leadership, targeted follow-up support to teachers, the fit (or lack of it) between program demands and resources, and the need for systemic, school-wide change versus individual classroom change. Although educators primarily learn about conflict resolution on their own or through staff development programs, this paper encourages substantial training. The inclusion of conflict resolution curriculums within preservice and graduate education programs has found its way into schools and departments of education in a variety of ways. For example, the National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME) and the National Institute for Dispute Resolution (NIDR) initiated the Conflict Resolution in Teacher Education Project in 1993. That project brought 11 colleges and universities together in a pilot program with experts in prejudice reduction, conflict resolution, multiculturalism, and teacher education. Two resources for additional information are listed. (Contains 20 references.) (LL)

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PREPARING TEACHERS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE SCHOOLS

ERIC DIGEST September 1995

by

Kathryn L. Girard

ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education
One Dupont Circle
Suite 610
Washington, DC 20036-1186

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Preparing Teachers for Conflict Resolution in the Schools

Kathryn L. Girard

Introduction

Violence prevention, conflict resolution, peer mediation, peaceable classrooms: These are the words that frame a growing movement in education. *Violence prevention* connotes both a need and a program, a part of which may address conflict resolution skills. *Conflict resolution* refers generally to strategies that enable students to handle conflicts peacefully and cooperatively outside the traditional disciplinary procedures. *Peer mediation* is a specific form of conflict resolution utilizing students as neutral third parties in resolving disputes. A *peaceable classroom* or school results when the values and skills of cooperation, communication, tolerance, positive emotional expression, and conflict resolution are taught and supported throughout the culture of the school.

Conflict resolution in education is linked to democracy and citizenship, developing a peaceful world, cooperative learning, multicultural education, prejudice reduction, social justice, violence prevention and intervention, critical thinking and problem-solving, and site-based management. In recent years, the growth of violence in schools has fueled interest in conflict resolution. There is, however, concern among conflict resolution practitioners that the need for immediate fixes to problems may lead to unrealistic and inappropriate goals and expectations. The press to address issues of social justice and prejudice leads to similar concerns. Experienced practitioners view conflict resolution as only one component in preparing youth to find nonviolent responses to conflict, in promoting social justice, and in reducing prejudice in school communities (Bettmann & Moore, 1994; Bodine, Crawford, & Schrumpf, 1994; DeJong, 1994; Miller, 1994).

Classroom curriculum, classsroom management, and school- or district-based programs are main entry points for conflict resolution in schools. Information and skills find their way quietly into individual classrooms through social studies, English, literature, science, and even math curricula, as well as through direct instruction in communication and cooperative problem solving. Some teachers, often in conjunction with curricular initiatives, choose to incorporate principles of conflict resolution in classroom management. Since peer mediation typically requires participation, support, and resources beyond those of a single classroom, entire schools and sometimes whole districts may be involved. Such comprehensive efforts may entail substantial parent education and staff development and are very dependent on strong administrative leadership (Lieber & Rogers, 1994; National Association for Mediation in Education [NAME], 1994).

This Digest will discuss several approaches, both inservice and preservice, to preparing teachers to play a role in conflict resolution within schools and will identify problematic issues related to preparation.

Conflict Resolution in Teacher Education

The study of conflict and its resolution encompasses many fields. Accordingly, teaching, research, and writing occurs in many academic departments. Course materials typically draw from social psychology, education, law, sociology, communication, and anthropology, as represented in foundation texts (Deutsch, 1973; Fisher & Ury, 1981; Axelrod, 1984; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Duryea, 1992).

Inservice Training

Conflict resolution in schools has grown rapidly. The National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME) estimates that in 1984, the year of its founding, there were approximately 50 school-based conflict resolution programs. Eleven years later NAME estimates the number of programs at well over 5,000. One of those early programs was the Responding to Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) sponsored by Educators for Social Responsibility, which now operates in 300 schools nationwide. Other programs have expanded similarly. The New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution has carried out a statewide school mediation program for 10 years and currently involves over 30,000 students. Through the Community Board Program, three-fourths of San Francisco's schools have peer conflict managers (National Institute for Dispute Resolution [NIDR], 1994; Inger, 1991).

Educators primarily learn about conflict resolution on their own or through staff development programs. The issue of whether teachers can conduct peer mediation and other conflict resolution programs without training is a central question. While mediation and peaceable school curricula are available to individual teachers, the authors encourage substantial training (Kreidler, 1984; Bodine et al., 1994; Schmidt, 1994). NAME provides a curriculum and program to train those interested in conducting staff development in schools (Townley & Lee, 1993). Training is viewed as necessary due to the difficulty in changing adult attitudes and behavior. Without sufficient training to address teachers' own behavior, there is the danger that the adults' words will not match their actions. Since modeling is essential, training is viewed as essential (Bodine et al., 1994; Lieber & Rogers, 1994; Miller, 1994).

Who conducts training for teachers? In Massachusetts one source is the Office of the Attorney General. Some states, such as Ohio, sponsor dispute resolution centers or commissions. University faculty based in special programs or in schools of law, education, or public justice provide training. In many states private nonprofit organizations work specifically on peace or conflict resolution in schools (NIDR, 1994).

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Other issues arising in the preparation of inservice teachers echo problems encountered in any change effort. They include the importance of the principal's leadership; the need for targeted follow-up support to teachers; the fit (or lack of it) between program demands and resources; and the need for systemic, school-wide change versus individual classroom change (DeJong, 1994; Lieber & Rogers, 1994).

Preservice and Graduate Preparation

The inclusion of conflict resolution within preservice and graduate education programs has grown more slowly but curricula have found their way into schools and departments of education in a variety of ways. The subject has been introduced within the frameworks of existing courses and as separate courses. Coursework combined with action research is viewed as particularly effective (Girard & Koch, 1995; Lieber & Rogers, 1994; Hughes, 1994).

NAME and NIDR initiated the Conflict Resolution in Teacher Education Project in 1993. That project brought together experts in prejudice reduction, multiculturalism, conflict resolution, and teacher education, including representatives from professional associations and specialties of health, counseling, and administration. The project's curriculum, *Conflict Resolution in the Schools* (Girard & Koch, 1996), is the first comprehensive set of materials directed at the incorporation of conflict resolution in the professional preparation of educators. It includes background material and instructional modules on the nature of conflict, foundation skills, conflict resolution processes, rationales for conflict resolution in schools, and application options for schools and teacher education. Eleven colleges and universities participated in a pilot training based on this curriculum and then implemented conflict resolution at their home sites.

Conclusion

Limited evaluation studies show positive trends related to aggression, student self-image and skills, and overall school climate (Lam, 1989; Metis, 1990). However, the full benefits of conflict resolution in schools may depend on the inclusion of this subject in the preservice curriculum; more comprehensive training; support of teachers, administrators, and parents at sites; and expansion from individual to school- and district-wide programs.

Two resources for additional information are:

- National Association for Mediation in Education, 205 Hampshire House, Box 33635, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003-3635. (413)545-2462.
- National Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1726 M Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20036. (202)466-4764.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education
1-800-822-9229 ericsp@inet.ed.gov

Mary E. Dilworth, Director
Judy A. Beck, Associate Director
Kathryn L. Girard, Author

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